Writer talks of stories that must be told

Panel of journalists discusses struggles of reporting on environmental problems

By GINNY MERRIAM
of the Missoulian

In 36 years writing about environmental problems while on the staff of New Yorker magazine, Paul Brodeur learned one thing, he said Friday in Missoula.

"Industry always lies; the government rarely tells the truth."

For Brodeur, that has resonated through his years of reporting on workers exposed to and killed by asbestos. For decades, he said, businesses that knew the substance would kill people working for them hid that knowledge from the workers, their families and the public.

That deceit is built into the corporate structure, he said.

"It is the private enterprise system as presently constituted," he said.

It's up to the press to tell the story of asbestos and other byproducts of human industry that are polluting the air, water and land – over and over and over – to keep it in the open, said Brodeur and others at a press conference at the Missoula Art Museum, beginning a weekend of events about asbestos and its lethal effects on the towns where it is mined and turned into products, including Libby.

Speaking with Brodeur, author of four books on asbestos, were Boston photojournalist and activist Bill Ravanesi, whose exhibit "Breath Taken: The Landscape and Biography of Asbestos" is on view at the art museum; journalist Andrew Schneider, author of "An Air That Kills"; Colleen Lux, author of a master's thesis on the Libby Community Advisory Group and researcher of asbestos issues in Australia; and Jim Fite, director of the White Lung Association, which advocates for asbestos victims.

Telling those stories is a hard job, said Schneider, who as a reporter for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer worked to tell the story of sickness and death in Libby among people who worked for W.R. Grace and Co.'s asbestos-contaminated vermiculite mine and mill.

Reporters must convince editors that such stories are worth the time and effort they require, he said.

"I have to admit it was a story we almost didn't do," he said. "It seemed so far-fetched."

But after Schneider and a photographer sat in the kitchens of sick men who worked in the mine and mill and came home and contaminated their families, they knew they had to.

"There was no way we could walk away from Libby," he said.

The outcome might have been different for workers had the press uncovered a 1982 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study that talked about the danger in the vermiculite ore being shipped out of Libby to more than 700 locations around the country, he said. It might have been different for Johns Manville workers if the press had learned that company doctors

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Asbestos

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since the 1930s adhered to a policy of not telling people they were sick with asbestos-related disease, Brodeur said.

Forty or so years ago, when Jim Fite worked in the shipyards of Baltimore, labor unions were powerful, he said. He and 15,000 others worked in shipyards, and 35,000 worked in steel mills.

"We created a great deal of the wealth of society," he said.

In 1978 and '79, when now-famous physician Irving Selikoff tested shipyard workers' lungs, 89.9 percent of those who worked more than 20 years had asbestos-related disease, Fite said.

"Now the steel mills are closed, the shipyards are in oblivion," he said. "What remains are tens of thousands of people who are sick with the effects of this industry."

The unions don't have the clout anymore, and it's up to the press and to organizations like the White Lung Association, he said, to keep environmental pollution in front of the public. The asbestos story is far from over: Every day, auto mechanics are exposed to the fibers in brake linings, and it remains in products across the country.

"We've been doing this for 25 years," he said, "and we'll do it as long as we have breath."

Reporter Ginny Merriam can be reached at 523-5251 or at gmerriam@missoulian.com.